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ABSTRACT

The family system--a primary locus in the formation of meaning for children--should encourage the healthy construction of communicative roles. What children learn about interaction is contingent on two processes, both central to the symbolic interaction perspective: role-taking and role-making. Role-taking is the ability to transcend an egocentric perspective, while role-making involves the translation of role-taking into concrete means for realizing the behavioral choices that constitute interaction. Within the perspective of role-taking and role-making, a child learns both primary forms and primary contents of communication. Two primary forms of communication, identified by Basil Bernstein, are position-oriented, in which families are closely tied to restrictive codes, and person-oriented, in which families encourage open communication systems. The primary contents of communication relate to the genderizing of self and others. The concept of gender appropriateness, taught to children through communication with them, affects the development of children's self-concept and imposes constraints on their communicative roles. The clearest avenue open for the deemphasis of gender as a primary content of communication lies in a move toward androgyny. Families should aim at a person-orientation that gives reason to communicative behavior in terms of humanity rather than gender. (GT)

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COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN:

TOWARD A HEALTHY CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNICATIVE ROLES

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As paper titles go, the one attached to this manuscript falls into the category of those that will give advice. We are by now well attuned to the connotations of "health" as that term is used by the humanistic psychologists. Let me assure you that I will not be providing in this paper any prescriptions for interpersonal nirvana nor will I be proposing any simple recipes for transcending the rather natural distinctions between child and adult. I do, however, intend to be somewhat didactic. I will be making some statements about what I think should be encouraged in our interactions with children, and in the process of doing that, some indictments are necessary.

The paper is divided into four topics: (1) families as meaning-giving systems with particular emphasis on how children develop meanings; (2) options for primary forms of communication that can occur within the family context; (3) gender as the primary content of communication learned by children; and (4) a union of form and content in communication as a way of encouraging the healthy construction of communicative roles in children.

When we speak about communication with children, the process must first be described in terms of two very different types of constraint. There are the constraints imposed because of the nature of the child, per se; these constraints primarily have to do with the degree to which the child is cognitively mature. Anyone who interacts with four-year-olds knows, for example, that it is futile to attempt a discussion about abstract principles, because the child is unable to conceptualize abstract principles. Such constraints are inherent. A second type of constraint that influences interaction with children is imposed by others, and these constraints primarily have to do with the set of norms and expectations we impose upon the child. These constraints are inherent only to

the extent that they always exist, but their specific character is sheerly arbitrary. It is that arbitrary character which often masks the vitality of alternatives that we cannot see because our conventional wisdoms about what is right and proper blind us. Such constraints are social. Throughout this paper, I will be concerned with the relationships between inherent and social constraints.

I would like to begin by sketching a framework through which we can understand the family as a meaning giving system in the lives of children. Because most children are born into families, it is fair to say that the family system is a primary locus in the formation of meaning and the communicative life of the child because of its role in shaping both the child's self-concept and the child's role behavior. Given the inherent constraints imposed by the child's own cognitive ability, the family serves to foster and fashion the child's identity and her/his options for role development, maintenance, and change. The child's communicative roles develop and acquire meaning through the interplay of cognitive abilities and social norms and expectations.

The family as a meaning giving system is perhaps best understood with reference to the conceptual orientations of the school of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionists assume that meaning exists in experience and is at every point sensible only in the context of action (Blumer, 1969, pp. 6-10). Specifically, they contend that meaning arises out of our communicative experiences, and that self-definition and self-concept are products of those experiences (Blumer, 1969, pp. 12-15; Manis and Meltzer, 1972, Part III). Through interacting with others, we learn what our interactions mean and who we are. We develop patterns of behavior as a way of avoiding total chaos in our interpersonal lives. These patterns take the form of roles, both in the conventionalized sense of standard and labeled positions in situations and in the interpersonal

sense of patterns that develop in our communication with specific others (Hewitt, 1976, pp. 144-146). Assume a child--let's call her Allison. Allison develops a sense of her conventionalized roles as child and as little girl because in her interactions, the distinctions between her rights and obligations and those of adults as well as those of her little brother are made clear. Allison also develops a sense of her interpersonal roles because she finds that there are different ways of interaction with both mother and father and with her little brother and the little boy who lives next door.

What any particular child learns about interaction with others and the nature of that interaction is contingent on two processes, both central to the symbolic interaction perspective. These processes are role-taking and role-making (Hewitt, 1976).

Role-taking is the ability to understand the cognitive, perceptual, and emotional perspectives of others while at the same time retaining one's own perspectives (Johnson, 1977). It is the interpersonal component of cognitive decentration. A very young child, of course, does not have role-taking abilities because the child is not able cognitively to transcend an egocentric perspective. Hence, our hypothetical child, Allison, at age four, yells to her mother to "Get this down for me!" when mother, standing in another room, has no idea what this is. During the preschool years, children normally begin to role-take in some rudimentary ways, but it is not until they reach the cognitive stage of concrete operations (usually at about age 6 or 7) that any broad range of role-taking abilities is present. In role-taking, the individual engages in reflective processes aimed toward a synthesis of a perspective on the self and a perspective on the other as interacting with the self. Role-taking is, then, fundamentally a negotiative process wherein the perspectives of others are anticipated, and those anticipations used to project upon the nature and effects of

interaction. As the child cognitively matures, the inherent constraints on communication become less and less applicable.

For most children, role-taking develops in a quite uniform manner (Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, and Jarvis, 1968), but there is some research to suggest that this development interacts to a certain extent with such social variables as socio-economic group (Sullivan and Hunt, 1967; Gilbert, 1969; Irwin, 1973) and geographic environment (Hollow and Cowan, 1973). This research is, however, by no means conclusive (see Meissner and Apthorp, 1976).

Role-making is an outgrowth of role-taking and involves the translation of the latter into concrete means for realizing the behavioral choices that constitute interaction. Because role-making involves both role-taking and creativity in organizing the results of role-taking, roles that are made can be individualized to a certain degree. The creative input of the individual explains why children with similar social experiences may create different roles, and why children with different social experiences may create similar roles. Also, certain types of social experience more or less habituate the range of roles that are made because of their constraint function. Thus, we can speculate about the child's primary social experiences as they provide regulation for the development of communicative roles.

Within the perspective of the child as a role-taker and role-maker, with both of these constrained by the child's cognitive ability, we need to develop a conceptualization of what communicative roles the child learns, and how he/she learns them. A child learns both primary forms of communication and primary contents of communication. The two are interdependent, and, thus, both must be considered for projecting "healthy" developments in the communicative domain.

Primary Forms of Communication

Primary forms of communication are best understood with reference to the work of Basil Bernstein, a British sociologist who has been concerned for some time about the genesis and maintenance of communicative patterns. Bernstein anchors his work in the theories of various symbolic interactionists, so we must understand his concepts of form as an outgrowth of the assumptions of such theories.

Bernstein (1970) identifies two primary forms of communication that serve to contrast and typify families. The two family types, which are contrasted on the basis of communicative form, are labeled "position-oriented" and "person-oriented." Position-oriented families maintain sharp boundaries between statuses and social identities along the lines of age, sex, and age-related family roles (such as grandparent, aunt/uncle). Person-oriented families have weaker boundary maintenance procedures, and differentiation between members is less absolute, making unique personal features legitimate in the definition of roles. Bernstein contends that a child in a person-oriented family is required to provide a wide range of communicative behaviors and to understand these as reasonable in relation to the specific individuals with whom they communicate. The child in a position-oriented family, on the other hand, is required to rely on communalized roles as guides to communication and is not expected to seek reasonable guidelines for communication based on the unique features of communication partners. For example, take our hypothetical child, Allison. If she develops in a position-oriented family, she learns that her role as a child is very communalized; she learns that mother and father can direct and prohibit behavior because they are mother and father and as such need only provide general rule statements as directives of behavior: "You're not going to leave the table until you drink your milk!"; "Apologize to your father"; "Be quiet, I'm on the phone." If, on the other hand, Allison develops in a person-oriented family, she will probably be

asked to drink her milk, apologize to her father, and be quiet, but these directives are less likely to stand on their own. Allison's parents will provide reasons for the desired behaviors that go beyond mother and father's rights to direct. Allison is told why milk is important, why an apology is in order, and that her father can't hear both her and his friend on the phone at the same time. The difference is essentially one of the degree to which the child is provided with verbalized reasons for performing or not performing certain communicative functions at certain times with certain individuals. The differences hinge on the distinction between communicative roles as legalistically determined by sharp role distinctions with those distinctions carrying rigid social meanings, and roles that rely on an elaboration of content as a means of personalizing the motives associated with communication from any role position. The child in the position-oriented family learns that what can be said and done in relation to others depends on the roles one has relative to others, while the child in a person-oriented family learns that while role relationships are important, the desirability or undesirability of certain behaviors depends on reasons that transcend the role relationships and focus on the personal nature of the participants.

Bernstein relates these two forms of family communication to his previously articulated concepts of "restricted code" and "elaborated code" (Bernstein, 1962a; Bernstein, 1962b). He believes that position-oriented families are closely tied to restricted codes because the "form of social relation is based upon closely shared expectations, upon an extensive range of shared expectations, upon a range of common assumptions" (Bernstein, 1970, p. 32). In contrast, person-oriented families rely on elaborated codes which "focus upon the experience of others as different from [one's] own"; they orient the child toward the verbal

channel because it carries "the elaboration of the speaker's intention" (Bernstein, 1970, p. 33).

These two types of form in family communication have important implications for the communicative roles that children develop. Bernstein (1970) sees the position-oriented family as fostering closed communication systems wherein "the range of alternatives which inhere in the roles . . . is relatively limited" (p. 40), while person-oriented families foster open communication systems in which roles must be "continuously accommodating and assimilating the different intents of its members" (p. 39). In short, positional families require that their children learn rather global rules pertaining to how one communicates with others, while person-oriented families require children to develop more complex strategies for the making of roles that are appropriately suited to the intentions of both self and others. Each system represents a set of social constraints that are overlaid on the child's inherent constraints as a cognitive being. Because the very young child cannot metacommunicate and cannot understand either system as arbitrary, she/he can only respond to family communication form as an immutable characteristic of the world.

One might simply drop the matter of form of family communication were it not for the implications of these two forms for the communicative life of the child. The differences most likely do matter in relation to the growing child's ability to fashion a satisfactory means for coping with others and coordinating interpersonal meanings that have adaptive potential. Few educators would disagree, for example, that families that encourage open communication systems provide the young child with a communicative mode that facilitates a successful educational experience. And Bearison and Cassel (1975) have demonstrated that first-grade children who come from person-oriented families are more able to accommodate their communication to the perspectives of listeners than are children of the

same age who come from position-oriented families. They attribute the difference to the more differentiated role systems of the children from person-oriented families.

Primary Contents of Communication

In addition to primary forms of communication, children also learn primary contents of communication. I believe that the primary contents of communication have to do with the genderizing of self and others.

Genderizing is given the status of primary content because, as Kohlberg and Zelnicker Ullian (1974) point out, "gender is the only fixed general category into which the child can sort itself and others [and as such] it takes on tremendous importance in organizing the child's social perceptions and actions" (p. 210). Thorne and Henley (1975) emphasize that "the identification of sex is probably the primary organizing variable in thinking about ('processing information' about) other human beings" (p. 6). Gender is considered to be communicative content because it is a given that functions to direct more specific contents; it is the deepest of substance. It is probably the only substance in our identities that makes every interactional role a communalized role at its core. As such, genderizing is perhaps the most dangerously arbitrary symbolic construction foisted upon young children.

If we return for a moment to the formal distinctions discussed earlier, it makes little difference whether genderizing is accomplished through mandated role stipulations or through elaborate verbalizations aimed toward rationalizing the norms that adults wish to transmit to children. It makes little difference whether our hypothetical child, Allison, bruised and dirty from a scuffle with her friend, is reprimanded with the positional invective, "Shame on you! Little girls don't fight!"; or whether she is cleaned up and soothed to the modulated tones of a parent who lovingly explains that, "Little girls really don't need to

fight because it only makes things worse and it makes you all a mess, and wouldn't it be better to talk about it?" In both cases, genderizing is basic.

Since meaning arises out of communication with others, we need first ask what about gender is typically culturally transmitted through communication. What "knowledge" do children gain that tells them that their communicative roles depend on their gender? What does it mean to be male or female? Ritchie Key (1975) offers a synthesis: males are "aggressive, assertive, authoritative, competitive, courageous, daring, decisive, domineering, independent, innovative, self-reliant, vigorous, as well as blunt, boastful, bull-headed, combative, presumptuous, pugnacious, sadistic and violent"; females are "affectionate. demure, dependent, emotional, excitable, gentle, illogical, indecisive, intuitive, passive, sensitive, submissive, tender, unambitious, as well as bitchy, fickle, saccharine, secretive, superficial, undependable, vacillating, whiney, and wiley" (p. 26). These terms do not combine to form full-blown styles for being masculine or feminine only in adult life; Bardwick (1971) notes evidence of the differences even in infants (pp. 100 ff.). Social constraints dictate norms and expectations for the young male and female, and such constraints are translated into concrete communicative interactions. The young child is not only explicitly told what boys and girls should do and say, but he/she is also presented with an abundant array of models from whom the more subtle contents of gender can be learned.

The teaching of gender appropriateness to children through communication with them is particularly insidious because of the ways in which children learn. The young child is limited to making relationships between concrete things. Thus, a continuous program of interaction based on associating gender with certain attributes can be accomplished by linking concrete instances of boy and girl with concrete instances of behaviors that are related to each. Back to Allison. She learns that certain of her actions are okay because she's a girl. She can

flirt, cry, enact tea parties, cross her leg at the knee as an imitation of mother. But her brother--let's call him Mark--learns that for him, these same behaviors are not okay. He is encouraged to be tough, to play games of action, and to cross his leg at the ankle. In either case, we are witnessing the simplest form of achieving identification. As Wood (1976) defines this process, "an identification is a belief that some attributes of a model--parents, siblings, peers, and so forth--belong to the self" (p. 201). The task of identifying the self as a boy or a girl is apparently not very difficult, since by age three, most children not only identify which sex they belong to, but also which jobs are done by men and women (Dubin and Dubin, 1965). The next step is to associate the self as gender-defined with others who belong to the same gender.

The importance of the child's engagement in the process of making identifications of gender has to do not just with the typical communicative roles that accompany gender identification but also with the development of self-concept. An individual develops her/his self-concept through interaction with others. As Kinch (1963) explains it, actual responses of others to an individual are important to the individual's self-perception; this self-perception influences self-conception; and the self-conception guides behavior. When children are encouraged to genderize their communicative roles in typical ways, they are, essentially, invited to feel good about themselves and to have an identity approved by others. If they fail to comply with gender expectations, they are essentially negating a means for establishing a positive social identity. Since the very young child, again, is not in the cognitive position to metacommunicate regarding gender identity, he/she must understand the appropriateness of genderized communication roles as an immutable characteristic of the world.

The references to genderizing as a basic content of communication made so far are in the domain of the explicit. The family system and the many other

social systems that support typical genderizations have available a number of straightforward dictums to help constrain the child's communicative roles. We can talk about little boys and girls and big men and women. We can tell children what they should do and what they shouldn't do. It appears, however, that genderizing is far deeper than that. A number of tacit dimensions of genderizing also exist, and young children evidence mastery of their gender in ways that few parents could ever be aware of. Birdwhistell (1970) concludes that children begin to display their gender nonverbally in their second year of life; baby boys roll their pelvises like adult males, and baby girls roll their pelvises like adult women. Sachs, Lieberman, and Erickson (1973) have found that prepubescent boys and girls whose vocal production mechanisms are not yet differentiated as in adulthood, nonetheless conform to "archetypes" for male and female vocal production; they appear to "throw" their voices in the direction of their gender group which allows others to "hear" their sex with little difficulty. These tacit dimensions of genderizing are not, of course, simple to explain, but it appears that the child combines a complex set of explicit constraints about gender with tacit gender modeling in order to arrive at a sex-appropriate presentation of self.

There is little reason why genderizing should take the specific character that it does, apart from the social utility of conventionalizing the differences between male and female so as to conventionalize their worth. There certainly is no humane reason why gender as the primary content of all communication should be as broadly applicable and constraining as it is. Gender will continue to exist as a primary content of communication, and certainly there is nothing wrong with this state of affairs. But as we define our concerns about facilitating the development of healthy communicative roles for children, we must look toward changes in this primary content that are less arbitrarily constraining.

The clearest avenue open for the de-emphasis of gender as a primary content of communication lies, I think, in a move toward androgyny. Amid the vocal feminist literature that passionately denounces the injustices wrought upon females through the process of genderizing, there are numerous references to male oppression, albeit a very different thing. And of course, oppression is only one side of the coin. Sandra Bem (1977), a leading figure in the development of the concept of androgyny, states that "both historically and cross-culturally, masculinity and feminity seem to have represented two complementary domains of positive traits and behaviors, behaviors which I believe to be essential for healthy and effective human functioning" (p. 319). To be androgynous means to be a combination of psychological attributes characteristic of males and females. An androgynous Allison can be both tender and independent. An androgynous Mark can be both decisive and gentle. And both children can come to understand when it is appropriate to interact in certain ways.

Because the process of genderizing is so intricately embedded in the communication system that we take as given, any transformation toward androgyny can only be accomplished through a communication system that itself is androgynous (Ritchie Key, 1975). Given that social changes require reflection and self-reference, we can only hope to fashion children who are less the victims of genderizing than ourselves by speaking to them in ways that encourage personhood rather than genderhood, and by speaking of both them and ourselves in a way that calls little attention to gender as a primary content of communication. A rather lengthy quotation from Key's Male/Female Language (1975) makes the point well:

> An androgynous language will be complementary rather than divisive. It will find balance and harmony in its completeness. It will establish an equilibrium in its unity rather than invidious separation. It will combine the abstract with the concrete; feeling with logic, tenderness with strength; force with graciousness. It will be a balanced tension--supporting rather than opposing. It will be exuberant and vibrant, leaving out the weak and the brutal . . . . It will move away from the cruel distinctions that have wounded both male and female human beings. (p. 147)

We come now to a point of bringing together issues of form and issues of content. The family system can combine form and content in several ways, but it seems clear that if we are aiming toward facilitating healthy communicative roles for children, the path is clear. Position-oriented forms of communication can only make reference to roles and statuses; they can only foster rigidity. Such rigidity is by definition antithetical and anomolous to a de-emphasis of gender as a primary communication content. This is especially true given that the family system, despite its centrality, is only a subsystem within a larger complex of social systems that foster the magnifying of gender. The only avenue to a reality of healthy communicative roles is a person-orientation that gives reason to communicative behavior in terms of humanity rather than gender. My preference is certainly for a generation of children whose communicative lives are primarily a matter of their individuality rather than a matter of their gender as that gender can be individualized in only a limited number of ways. It may be true that boys will be boys and girls will be girls, but with a little encouragement, they just might be the best of both.

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